

## Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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**Work, Industry and Canadian Society**, by Harvey J. Krahn and Graham S. Lowe, Scarborough, Ontario, Nelson Canada, 1988, pp. X + 310, ISBN 0-17-603414-5

Labour relations in Canada is an interesting subject for a variety of reasons. There are several similarities with the U.S. scene but also there are meaningful differences originating from the more profound European background and the growing sense of independence in Canada. This book is written from a leftist perspective with an emphasis on class differences, capitalist concentration and exploitation, dependence on U.S. capital, and discriminatory practices (women, youth, minorities, interprovincial differences, segregated labour markets). The book is intended as a text for college training and therefore general themes (contribution of Marx, origins of industrial capitalism, etc.) are mixed with detailed descriptions of specific Canadian problems.

The first chapter examines **industrialization** and the rise of capitalism, presenting various interpretations of industrial growth, the changing character of the Canadian economy, and perspectives of future developments. Chapter two is devoted to **labour force trends**. The third chapter deals with the configuration of **labour markets**: good jobs do not multiply fast enough and they are available only to certain selected people; segmentation of labour markets leads to many inequalities; occupational aspirations, reinforced by educational expansion, are difficult to satisfy; there are substantial differences by gender and immigrant status; there is a problem of deskilling; the more advantaged workers perceive the others as competitors; most new employment results from low paying jobs.

**Work organizations** are treated in the fourth chapter. The rationality of bureaucracy is questioned. Resistance of workers against management is emphasized as originating from the basic class of interests between employers and employees. Workers are more or less active in defending themselves against the direct or indirect control imposed upon them in the interest of the employer. Chapter five is devoted to **women's employment**, which has been changing rapidly in Canada.

The **subjective experiences of work** are treated in the sixth chapter. It deals with work values and work orientations, job satisfaction and dissatisfaction, stress and alienation, the mutual relationship between work and leisure. Here it would be worth exploring, much more than this has been done, the mutual relationship between the values and priorities of the consumer society on one side, and the instrumental approach to work on the other side.

Consumerism is not necessarily limited to capitalism. The phenomenon of alienation does appear under capitalism as well as under state socialism. People working for the socialist state are not necessarily less alienated than the workers employed by the big capitalist corporations. The change of property from private to public is not any assurance that working people would feel better about their destiny. The task of creating work institutions more accommodating and satisfying to their employees is a difficult one, and needs to be promoted on the basis of empirical and theoretical studies focused on the roots of alienation.

Chapter seven on **trade unions and industrial relations** is probably the best in the whole book. It deals mostly with the Canadian scene but also contains international comparisons. It would be worth considering here the relatively high dependence of Canada on the U.S. market and undeveloped Canadian trade relations outside North America. Improvement of the international competitive position of Canada depends, among other things, on better industrial relations and a much more sophisticated utilization of human resources.

The authors probably are right, blaming mostly the narrowmindedness of management. However, in this field civil servants and trade union leaders also need to open themselves to the more constructive solutions. Each among three involved sides wants to cooperate only on its

own terms without being ready itself to offer something constructive. Devotion to the public good remains mostly on the level of formal declarations without adequate action following the promises. The reinforcement of a mutual trust relationship is needed in Canada. In this respect, much may be learned from Sweden, Austria, and the FRG. The current fascination with the Japanese system ignores how much it is actually paternalistic and does not fit into the North American democratic traditions.

Chapter eight on **industrial conflict** is definitely too short, and is focused on strikes which in their length are more dramatic in Canada than in other western countries. Totally missing is conflict **inside** the workplace, even if it has much impact on productivity and work satisfaction. It is true, in this respect, that the empirical evidence is modest but the authors should emphasize the need to explore this sensitive field. For example, inside Canadian hospitals there are a variety of tensions arising not only from inadequate wages and working conditions but also from managerial incompetence.

In general, the importance of strikes seems to be overestimated (for example, the improvement of health conditions may be much more economically beneficial than the reduction of strikes), and managerial incompetence is underestimated. Of course, the latter question has several obvious ramifications. Even the best managers are helpless within an organizational framework which does not allow him/her to act responsibly and professionally.

The last chapter deals with **work in transition**. The humanization of work depends, according to the authors, on several conditions: legislation enabling employees to reconstruct their work environments, readiness of managers to share power with workers, proper balancing of economic and social goals, technical innovation programs compatible with collective bargaining.

Here it would be necessary to recognize the fact that so far management is the main promotor of humanization projects. Even in Scandinavia, trade unions are mostly passive in this field, allowing management to take initiatives. It is obvious that the basic reason management is interested in humanization projects are of an economic and organizational nature. Only on the basis of mutual understanding and tolerance is it possible to promote humanization of work that would go well together with the improvement of productivity. Responsible and truly professional consultancy is much needed, but the awareness of this factor is not manifested in the book.

The economic future of Canada depends not only on raw materials but also on entrepreneurship. For example, Canada's market share of high-tech trade is only 3% and in order to secure the country's future in this field it would be necessary to capture niches in the newer technological areas (Globe and Mail, 23rd May, 1988, p. A7). Thousands of new jobs may be secured if several conditions will be fulfilled. One of them is the **quality of education**, making people more versatile and committed to economic growth.

There is an obvious danger in the progressing polarization and marginalization: the majority of workers concentrated in the low paid and unsafe jobs, and the small minority of sophisticated experts permanently occupying privileged positions. Another danger is the continuation of antagonistic industrial relations preventing Canada from competing on international markets or even defending its current position in the North American market. These concerns should be elaborated in the book in order to recognize both positions: not only the position represented by trade unions but also that represented by management. The wellbeing of the working people in Canada in the long run depends on **economic success**: it is necessary to have enough to distribute. The economy of scarcity harms everybody.

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